Enhancing Social Competence in Inclusive Education Contexts: Social Learning – Meanings, Benefits and Skills

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to focus on the Social Learning Theory by exploring and describing the fundamental social concepts, meanings and dimensions that underpin it, both in the context of teaching and in the broader connection between learning and practical education. Our objective is to conceptually and semantically define key elements of Social Learning Theory and other complex cognitive processes that provide applied methods for understanding how we learn from others and how we establish both individual and collective effectiveness. This paper presents an applied approach to utilizing and assessing the effectiveness of this theory in both learning and teaching by fostering the development of fundamental knowledge and skills. This approach aligns with the principles of Education for All as outlined in Agenda 2030.
Practical implications: This paper emphasizes the need for professional development and continuous support to help teachers, educators, instructors, leaders, etc, effectively integrate social skills into inclusive contexts.

Keywords: Social Competence, Social Learning, Inclusive Education, Inclusion, Lifelong Learning, Skills

Introduction

A fundamental characteristic of Social Learning Theory is its emphasis on effectiveness in any learning or professional endeavor (Horton, 2012; Lyons & Berge, 2012). This paper presents an applied approach to utilizing and assessing the effectiveness of this theory in both learning and teaching by fostering the development of fundamental knowledge and skills. Key topics related to information processing in learning and education are examined concisely and purposefully, with a particular focus on social learning through reflection, critical thinking, and engagement with authentic teaching and work-related projects.

The article highlights basic issues of the social learning and applied ways of how we learn from others. Given that modern scientific discourse refers to interdisciplinary

aspects of social learning (Powell, 2024; Jinghuan, 2024; Bergin & Biddle, 2025/ Findik, 2025), the ultimate goal is to enhance individual cognitive and social effectiveness. A significant aspect of this discussion is the promotion of social competence for all individuals, including those with disabilities and special educational needs, in inclusive contexts, in line with Agenda 2030.

Teaching and Learning: Outcomes, Factors and Benefits

Modern perspectives on learning position the learner at the center of a continuous effort to understand the world. The learning process involves acquiring knowledge, skills, behaviors, and emotions, which contribute to overall personal development. Research findings have identified key learning outcomes, categorized as follows (Nikonanou, 2015):

- Knowledge and understanding – The assimilation and comprehension of information.
- Skill development – The enhancement of cognitive, communication, emotional, and physical abilities.
- Attitudes, mindsets, and values – Perspectives on life and humanity that can have a positive or negative impact.
- Enjoyment, inspiration, and creativity – Engagement in leisure activities, new experiences, and creative pursuits.
- Action, behavior, and progress – Personal growth, decision-making, and lifestyle management.

Given that learning assessment has evolved to encompass a broader perspective, an additional model known as "social learning outcomes" has been introduced (Nikonanou, 2015). These include:

- Stronger and safer communities – Fostering understanding among group members and encouraging familial and cultural support.
- Health and well-being – Promoting a healthier lifestyle that enhances well-being for both younger individuals and older adults who require appropriate support to maintain independence.
- Public empowerment – Strengthening community engagement, volunteerism, the development of safe public spaces, and ensuring that public services respond effectively to community needs.

At this point, the developmental framework emerges as a crucial factor in learning. According to Elliott et al. (2008), a developmental framework refers to the analysis and comprehension of human development based on the multiple levels of interaction between individuals and their environment. This framework attempts to comprehensively capture

the complexity of students' backgrounds by focusing on four fundamental developmental forces:

1. Physical environments – e.g., classroom spaces, workplaces.
2. Social influences – e.g., family, friends.
3. Personality traits – e.g., external appearance, temperament.
4. The influence of time – Changes that occur over time.

Thus, a key determinant of learning and development is the dynamic relationship between student complexity in a classroom or group setting and the multi-layered developmental framework (school, home, peers, etc.). The intricate and interconnected components of this framework - including individual differences and evolving relationships between learners and their environment form an intricate web of influence throughout the entire process of human development.

Reducing the Gap in the Benefits of Lifelong Learning for Individuals and Communities

Lifelong learning has many benefits, including helping people explore new opportunities in employment and build a career, leading to improvements in their health and well-being, as well as supporting community engagement and active participation in public life. The importance of lifelong education is increasing as it aligns with a rapidly changing economy and society in the global community.

Research data show that participation in learning has decreased over the past decade, with significant inequalities in access to education based on age, group, etc. (https://learningandwork.org.uk/what-we-do/lifelong-learning/). There are strong disparities in access to education, and the issue lies in how we can reduce barriers, encourage, and support people in learning and retraining throughout their lives (https://learningandwork.org.uk/what-we-do/lifelong-learning/learning-and-retraining/).

Linguistic, mathematical, and digital literacy, financial capabilities, health literacy, and citizenship are essential prospects for people's employment and careers, as well as their ability to be active and participate in their communities. Over time, economic and social changes and technological advancements increase their significance in the benefits of lifelong education. It is appropriate to mention the focus on identifying the advantages of developing fundamental skills, understanding how adults engage in learning, and exploring the most effective ways to provide basic skills education (https://learningandwork.org.uk/what-we-do/essential-life-skills/).

Education and employment play a crucial role in society, offering opportunities for self-fulfillment, social competence, and the foundation of strong communities (https://learningandwork.org.uk/what-we-do/employment-and-social-security/). It is also

important to note that key aspects of job quality, such as security, flexibility and overall progress in work, learning, and life, play a decisive role in the living standards of individuals and communities (https://learningandwork.org.uk/what-we-do/good-work-progression/). Finally, it should be noted that the factors influencing employability and work, determining new requirements, include higher education institutions, policymakers and employers (Butum & Nicolescu, 2019). In this direction, key guidelines for effective learning will be provided.

Effective Learning – Principles and Strategies

Utilizing a fundamental bibliographic source for establishing effective learning (Reid, 2019), the following points are noted:

- There is unanimous agreement on the level of learning strategies that learning is a process, learning requires a period of consolidation, learning is more effective when its content is familiar, the use of material in different educational contexts strengthens memory retention and understanding, internal (individual motivation) and external (environmental) factors may influence learning and learning is lifelong.
- Specific learning methods (learning styles) are more effective for certain types of learning. Each individual has their own way of learning. Learning takes place in stages linked to age. The role of the environment is less significant than the cognitive ability of the individual in learning. Learning should be differentiated for children with different abilities. Intelligence is correlated with learning ability. Furthermore, for effective learning to take place, it is necessary:
    - For the learner to study the data and requirements of the assigned task.
    - To understand the relevant information required to perform the task.
    - To recognize the indications of the task or the provided information.
    - To highlight key points of the task and relevant information.
    - To execute the task using the information.
    - To become efficient in task execution.
    - To be capable of transferring learning (acquired knowledge) to other related efforts.

From the outset, recognizing learning needs in relation to the focus on each learner's experiences is valuable, always in the direction of the assigned task. Fundamental factors influencing learning include (Reid, 2019):

- The environment
- Mood
- Self-esteem

- Motivation
- Teaching strategy
- Learning method
- The task and its expectations
- The material
- Forms of support

The above factors impact the learning process and can strengthen learning towards any assigned task.

- The autonomous stage of learning is particularly interesting, as it occurs after extensive practical training, which in turn includes the use of information from a task (knowledge) and the development of skills in task execution. Finally, capable learners (students, trainees, etc.) have the ability to transfer skills to new learning situations. A decisive indicator of success in learning is the extent to which an individual is able to transfer learning skills.

The value of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to people's perceptions of their ability to perform actions and tasks (academic, professional, etc.), while outcome expectations refer to beliefs about the anticipated results of these tasks and actions. Self-efficacy is partly related to learners' abilities and influences their choice of activities. It is relevant to academic learning and other performance-related activities, as well as to task selection and broader career choices. It should be noted that an individual's self-efficacy concerning a task depends on their preparation, physical condition, and emotional state on the one hand, and on the other hand, it depends on the nature of the task itself (duration, potential difficulties, etc.) and the social environment (group, class conditions, etc.). Additionally, perceptions of progress reinforce self-efficacy in learning, which sustains motivation and learning itself.

For example, trainers, professionals, and educators observe the progress of learners and then provide model corrective instruction based on the skills demonstrated by the learners. Finally, role models in an individual's environment serve as an important source of information for assessing their self-efficacy (Schunk, 2009).

Enhancing Social Competence in All Inclusive Contexts

In light of current socio-economic conditions, both in formal and non-formal education, applied knowledge and social competence skills can be strengthened. This should include fostering the empowerment of learners and employees, enabling them to reframe problems themselves (Sorohan, 1993), and ultimately enhancing their self-efficacy

within educational and professional structures.

In this regard, and based on the Agenda 2030 for quality learning and inclusion for all, Social Learning Theory can contribute significantly toward the goal of inclusive education for all individuals, both with and without disabilities (Gkiaouri et al., 2022; https://www.digitallearninginstitute.com/blog/what-is-social-learning-theory-strategies-and-examples/).

About Social Learning Theory: A Basic Description

In general, the concept of "theory" expresses a position or system of positions regarding a natural law, which—as a rule or system of rules—explains one or more phenomena of the physical and biological world. The formulation of a theory aims to activate human intervention in a predictive, developmental, and problem-solving manner concerning the phenomena of the physical and social system (Dímou, 2001).

On this basis, and particularly in the field of educational sciences, we should note that:

- Learning is a relatively permanent change in knowledge, skill, or behavior as a result of experience and
- A theory is an intellectual framework for organizing a vast amount of knowledge about a phenomenon, leading educators to a deeper understanding and interpretation of its nature (O' Donnell et al., 2021).

A key characteristic is that "according to social learning, an individual, by observing the behavior of another person, becomes activated and exhibits the same behavior. This activation can result from observing the behavior of real individuals or their physical representations. In this way, the individual learns to become sensitized or engaged in the environment without prior exposure to another type of learning" (Bandura, 1969, as cited in Dímou, 2001).

The two fundamental elements of Social Learning are the "observer-individual" and the "model-individual" whose behavior becomes the subject of observation (Dímou, 2001). Specifically, according to O' Donnell et al. (2021), Hammer (2011) Horton (2012), Rumjaun & Narod (2020) and Saka (2025):

- Social Learning Theory is a theory about how we learn from others. Developed by Albert Bandura, it introduced new elements to existing concepts of reinforcement and punishment, such as processes of observation, encoding, and recalling the behavior of a model. According to Social Learning Theory, consequences follow appropriate and inappropriate behavior, and these consequences help individuals learn suitable behavioral patterns. Thus, we learn not only through direct experience but also indirectly, meaning that we substitute our own experiences with those of others - by watching and observing what others do. Moreover,

reinforcement and punishment following our actions influence our future behavior.
- The most fundamental characteristic of Social Learning is its effectiveness. Educators can leverage Social Learning Theory with learners by guiding them toward appropriate behavioral models and promoting Education for All.
In the context of teaching:
- Learning can occur through observation, imitation, and indirect reinforcement.
- Knowledge can stem from model imitation, observational learning, and indirect reinforcement.
- The student pays attention to a selected model, observes it, retains information, and potentially replicates the same behavior.
- The educator serves as a role model or directs attention to other models, offering various opportunities for practice based on the selected model behavior and ultimately providing indirect reinforcement.
- Peers may also act as role models.

It is worth noting that students often observe without learning. Observational learning only occurs if the learner pays attention to the behavior of a model and can replicate it with sufficient motivation. Therefore, the following are required:
- Attention – Learners must carefully observe the key characteristics of a model to learn.
- Retention – Learners must retain the observed information using memory strategies, such as mental rehearsal or acronyms that aid in memorizing specific steps.
- Reproduction – Initially, students' attempts to imitate a model's behavior may be awkward. However, with practice and feedback, their attempts improve and become more similar to the model.
- Motivation – Learners may have the ability to imitate a model's behavior (having observed and retained the relevant information), but they must perceive the behavior as important or as something that will lead to success and reinforcement.

Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice and Building Skills with Critical Reflection

According to Dímou (2001), the concept of "Social Learning" encompasses both the conditions under which learning takes place and the capacity for social learning, which is a consequence of learning itself. To reduce the gap between theory and practice, it is essential to emphasize improvement in practice. In other words, the experience of a classroom, a group, etc., requires knowledge and skills related to the learning and teaching context. Creating a constructive learning experience for learners necessitates the

development of theory - understanding and the improvement of practice - enhancing learning.

Levels of reflection, whether in teaching, education in general, or work settings, occur through:

- Recall (implemented through teaching techniques where information is recalled and behavior is imitated),
- Analysis (examining the "why," analyzing the reasons behind an event, or seeking connections between different perspectives of an experience), and
- Reflective teaching (an approach aimed at improving future conditions and analyzing a situation from multiple perspectives for a better understanding of behavior).

These processes contribute to the evolution of teaching and work since reflection for action is an integral part of professional improvement (O' Donnell et al., 2021).

Example: Well-structured questions encourage reflection, deeper understanding, and useful analysis of an issue. For example:

- What is your goal?
- How much time do you need for the endeavor?
- What skills do you seek to develop?
- What prior knowledge do you have?
- What obstacles do you anticipate?

Complex Cognitive Processes in Information Processing and Guidelines for Skill Building

Fundamental cognitive processes in information processing within a complex cognition framework include (O' Donnell et al., 2021; Elliot et al., 2008):

1. Metacognition – Thinking about one's own thought processes and the strategies used, such as success strategies. Metacognition involves planning (setting goals), monitoring, and evaluation. It is not general but linked to specific activities (https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/el/pub/viewpoints/experts/metacognition-teaching.htm).

   Additionally, metacognition, defined as the knowledge individuals have about their cognitive functions, is distinguished into two aspects: Systematically fostering metacognitive skills in teaching and learning significantly contributes to children's future development, as it leads to more lasting and independent learning (Papaleontiou-Louca,2002; https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259848802_Metagnose_E_ennoia_kai_didaskalia_tes).

- o   Theoretical metacognition – Awareness of the knowledge or information one possesses, i.e., knowing what one knows (or does not know).
- o   Practical metacognition – Knowledge of the mechanisms of knowledge acquisition, i.e., understanding how to extract, retain, and apply knowledge from the environment.

2. Argumentation – The process of adopting a position, justifying it, and presenting counterarguments. Logical reasoning and argumentation enhance content comprehension, motivation, problem-solving abilities, and the skills needed for argument development (O' Donnell et al., 2021).

3. Transfer – The ability to apply learned skills or knowledge in a new context. Successful transfer of knowledge or skills to a new setting constitutes positive transfer, whereas negative transfer occurs when prior learning hinders new learning. Transfer is crucial for connecting learning with real-life applications, such as transferring school knowledge (subjects or disciplines) to real-world projects (e.g., community-based work). For this reason, practice opportunities and continuous feedback from educators are essential for consolidating knowledge and skills (O' Donnell et al., 2021).

Conclusion

In summary, as emphasized in the literature and considering contemporary socio-educational conditions with the support of new technologies, social learning theory and complex cognitive processes hold significant importance both in pedagogy and in skill-building and professional development (WIL, 2008; Kalaitzidis & Trapezanidis, 2010; Kapravelou, 2011). Following these guidelines and as described above, learners can experience a sense of individual and collective efficacy as they collaborate with experienced community members (educators, trainers, senior professionals, etc.) to implement authentic projects real world projects in work and life (O' Donnell et al., 2021; Elliot et al., 2008).

Practical implications

The study emphasizes the need for professional development and continuous support to help teachers, educators, instructors, leaders, etc, integrate effectively social skills into inclusive contexts.

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